

Popular music in 2025: Signs of resistance emerge amid war, fascism and corporate conformity

Erik Schreiber, James Martin, Matthew Brennan
30 December 2025

The past year witnessed tremendous and ongoing upheavals, including the revival of fascism, genocide, war, mass layoffs, the slashing of social spending and attacks on democratic rights. This onslaught led to major strikes and protests in the United States, Italy, Bulgaria, Nepal, Kenya, Indonesia, Madagascar and elsewhere. These crises inevitably intersected with major cultural moments in international music, from festivals such as Glastonbury to public confrontations between artists and the political establishment.

But to a large extent, popular music has failed to register these ground-shaking developments. The most successful and best promoted artists instead offered escapism, fantasy, romance and titillation. Artists who took a more serious approach have nevertheless addressed questions of fascism, war and inequality in limited or tentative ways (and these limitations have objective roots).

Overall, musicians made their strongest statements outside the recording studio, reflecting the growing mass opposition within the world population. This is an appropriate time to take stock of the popular music of 2025.

Festival crowds and onstage confrontations with authorities provided the sharpest expressions of political urgency this year. At the Glastonbury festival in the United Kingdom, for example, Irish rap trio Kneecap and punk duo Bob Vylan led thousands in chants of “Free, free Palestine!” amid a sea of Palestinian flags, provoking government attacks and visa revocations—above all, by the fascistic Trump administration in the US—that showed the ruling class’s fear of widespread opposition to genocide.

Significantly, the British Labour government’s prosecution of Kneecap collapsed as the band won mass support internationally. Attempts at censoring bands like the Mary Wallopers over their opposition to genocide also backfired. Artists such as Massive Attack, Fontaines D.C. and Brian Eno joined with a broad coalition of artists in support of those targeted for speaking out against genocide and censorship, forming alliances aimed at defending artistic freedom and resisting political repression.

As social inequality intensified in every country throughout the year, a similar stratification has been taking place among popular musicians. A handful of major stars enjoyed broad exposure and fabulous commercial success, while conditions stagnated or deteriorated for most musicians. Corporate control over streaming platforms, touring infrastructure and festival circuits have reinforced this divide, rewarding political conformity and punishing those who step outside the accepted boundaries.

Taylor Swift’s *The Life of a Showgirl* broke industry sales records in its opening week. Sabrina Carpenter’s *Man’s Best Friend* broke the record for the most-streamed album on a single day and was certified Platinum. These albums offer no trace of protest and demand little of the listener.

Kendrick Lamar, Bad Bunny, the Weeknd and Lady Gaga also released top-selling or top-streaming music. Though portrayed as more serious artists or rebellious figures, their music speaks little to everyday concerns and poses no challenge to the capitalist order.

Notably, Bad Bunny avoided touring the US for fear that his audiences would be attacked by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) goons. Perhaps his seriousness about this issue will influence his approach to his music in the coming year.

In comparison with the above-mentioned stars, who are backed by the music industry’s colossal promotional muscle, most artists struggle to be heard. Swift, Carpenter et al garner tens of billions of streams per year, a middle layer of artists gets hundreds of millions and most others (many of whom are on small or independent labels) get fewer than a thousand. Of the few crumbs that streaming platforms give musicians, the biggest acts get the biggest share.

According to a 2014 study, the top 1 percent of artists took in approximately 77 percent of all recorded music income, while a 2020 analysis indicated the top 1 percent received some 90 percent of all music streams.

The decline in the profitability of touring is making matters worse for most artists. Travel, lodging, insurance and visa costs have all risen, while artists’ fees have remained stagnant. In a 2024 survey conducted by Pirate.com, 88 percent of artists reported that their touring costs were rising. About 72 percent were not making money from touring, 48 percent broke even and 24 percent *lost money* on tours. At the same time, entertainment goliaths like Live Nation are consolidating their control over venues and ticket pricing. As a result, touring is no longer a comparatively stable source of income for musicians.

AI has the potential to open new creative horizons for musicians. But in 2025, developments suggested that the entertainment companies could use AI to replace musicians entirely. Rock band the Velvet Sundown and R&B singer Xania Monet were both generated using AI. Their voices, instruments, lyrics, music and biographies were created entirely by machines. That these “artists” produced music devoid of personality was of little concern to entertainment executives, who see only the potential to cut costs and eliminate friction with the artists in their employ. If it were controlled by musicians, AI could greatly help with recording and production or even help spark inspiration. But as long as the technology is controlled by the music industry, musicians will increasingly find themselves “competing” against it.

Despite many of these challenges, a few veteran artists also stuck their necks out this year. Roger Waters has continued to speak out in support of mass protests and released his powerful concert film *This Is Not a Drill*. Bruce Springsteen and Jack White drew sharp rebukes from Trump for their outspoken criticism of political repression. Neil Young released

a protest song directly challenging the “billionaire fascists” in the US. Ilan Volkov, the Israeli-born conductor, also took a powerful public stand against the genocide at the BBC Proms, only to be cut from mainstream coverage as cultural institutions shied away from political confrontation.

The year also saw the passing of two of popular music’s remarkable figures, Brian Wilson and Sly Stone, who both were 82. As we noted, Wilson’s “greatest accomplishments during that period remain relevant, genuine, substantial, and intensely moving.” Stone was a pioneer of funk whose music evinced optimism, insouciance and interracial harmony.

The following is a list of releases that we considered noteworthy in 2025.

Erik Schreiber

(In descending order of preference)

Defiant Life by Vijay Iyer and Wadada Leo Smith. A mournful and angry statement of opposition to the ongoing genocide of the Palestinians. Like Miles Davis before him, Smith exploits the muted trumpet’s resemblance to the human voice. The album is a cry of protest and a celebration of human resilience.

Horror by the Mekons. The veteran English punks confront British imperialism, ongoing war and the plight of refugees with humanity, a sense of history and a touch of humor. Their stylistic promiscuity remains refreshing, their moments of pessimism unfortunate.

Resonance by Bill Fox. The reclusive, Cleveland-based rock musician (formerly of the Mice) broke a long silence with a characteristically lo-fi album that deals with romantic difficulties, dehumanizing labor and the official promotion of nationalism and war. His raspy vocals, straightforward melodies and concrete images command attention.

The Purple Bird by Bonnie “Prince” Billy. With warmth and humility and without pretension, the singer-songwriter allows glimpses of the world’s crisis to enter his celebrations of simple pleasures and human solidarity. If his analysis is dubious, his yearning for love and peace is not.

Matthew Brennan

Jazz albums

Several jazz musicians produced compelling albums, often combining melodic and uptempo musical expressions with an appropriate seriousness demanded by the growing social crisis. To be certain, there are still too many talented artists who tend toward opaque experimentalism or default, in a political sense, to black nationalist themes. But the thoughtful arrangements and improvisations expressed by the artists below were a musically optimistic counter to those more cynical moods.

Drummer Joe Farnsworth’s album, built around a supremely talented and thoughtful sextet, was one of the most rewarding jazz albums of the year. The ambitious album by the large New Zealand collective the Circling Suns was convincingly anchored in an unusual warmth and optimism. Indian drummer Tarun Balani’s album about the journey of his refugee uncle was something of a revelation as well. And even if a bit more subdued this year, the 87-year old saxophonist Charles Lloyd continues a remarkable string of albums with his latest release, featuring the masterful pianist Jason Moran.

- *The Big Room* – Joe Farnsworth (US)
- *Orbits* – The Circling Suns (New Zealand)

- *Figure in Blue* – Charles Lloyd (US)
- *Strange Heavens* – Linda May Han Oh (US/Australia)
- *Arc and Edge* – James Davis’ Beveled (US)
- *Kadahin Milandaasin* – Tarun Balani (India)
- *Painter of the Invisible* – Jaleel Shaw (US)

Rock/folk albums

Folk and soul singers made serious efforts this year. The Delines produced a soulful, groove-driven album about men and women struggling near, or totally consumed by, the brutal edges of American society: the drug addicted, the ex-felons, the homeless, the abused and those stuck in social and economic dead-ends. The band’s body of work manages to capture something honest, while being clearly empathetic toward its victims, about the increasingly desperate conditions across the country in small towns, rural areas and on the periphery of big US cities.

The sensitive reworkings of Woody Guthrie songs by British folk artist Reg Meuross felt like one of the most relevant albums this year. Covers of songs sympathetic to the plight of immigrants, such as “Deportee” and “Fit For Work (Illegal Hands),” were among the more meaningful folk songs of the year.

The albums by S.G. Goodman, Mavis Staples and the singers Salvador Sobral and Sílvia Pérez Cruz were, with some tracks excepted, convincing as well. All were buoyed by serious, humane and at times beautiful singing and song arrangements. The creative use of the unusual, for recorded music anyway, African babatoni instrument was also a revelation in the case of the upbeat Madalitso Band from Malawi. And the Malian band Songhoy Blues, as well as the Nigerian band Etran de L’Aïr, continue to produce highly engaging and urgent music, centered on the “desert blues” style of guitar music.

- *Mr. Luck & Ms. Doom* – The Delines (US)
- *Fire and Dust: A Woody Guthrie Story* – Reg Meuross (UK)
- *Planting by the Signs* – S.G. Goodman (US)
- *Sad and Beautiful World* – Mavis Staples (US)
- *Sílvia & Salvador* – Salvador Sobral & Sílvia Pérez Cruz (Spain/Portugal)
- *Ma Gitala* – Madalitso Band (Malawi)
- *Héritage* – Songhoy Blues (Mali)
- *100% Sahara Guitar* – Etran de L’Aïr (Niger)

Electronic and instrumental albums

The albums below stood out as some of the more refreshing and inventive music this year, often driven by distinct and exciting musical approaches to familiar genres. Guitarist-singer Mei Semones, for instance, crafted an interesting variety of musical styles around bossa nova, while singing in English and Japanese. Bandleader Raúl Monsalve also convincingly manages to meld a wide range of world sounds across a vibrant collection of songs. The electronic music of Barry Can’t Swim (Joshua Spence Mainnie) and the “heavy” rock-based instrumental pieces from the band Pelican produced some of the more sonically dramatic songs this year. The tight and energetic bluegrass compositions of the Onlies and the “muddy” blues-country playing by the Moonrisers were the most rewarding listens of those particular musical genres as well.

- *Animaru* – Mei Semones (US/Japan)
- *SOL* – Raúl Monsalve y los Forajidos (Venezuela/France)
- *Hawalat* – Charif Megarbane (Lebanon)
- *Loner* – Barry Can’t Swim (UK)
- *You Climb The Mountain* – The Onlies (US)
- *Harsh and Exciting* – Moonrisers (US)
- *Flickering Resonance* – Pelican (US)

Classical albums

Pianist Alice Sara Ott’s renditions of the nocturnes of Irish composer John Field (1782–1837) were one of the more intriguing classical studio recordings this year. On a completely different terrain, the chilling and testimony-driven album helmed by the Kronos Quartet and documentarian-

composer Mary Kouyoumdjian, about the far-reaching devastation and trauma of the Armenian genocide of 1915–1917 and the Lebanese civil war between 1975 and 1990, felt like one of the most urgent pieces of the year. The retelling of those horrors has recognizable and immediate parallels to the ongoing genocides currently being carried out and backed by Israel, US and European imperialism in Gaza and Sudan.

- *John Field: Complete Nocturnes* – Alice Sara Ott (Germany/Japan)
- *Witness* – Kronos Quartet and Mary Kouyoumdjian (US)

Songs

Convincing songs about the tension, social anger or empathy gathering among broad layers of workers and young people did emerge this year, though not in large supply. With a couple of exceptions—such as the interesting love songs by Cameron Winter and Derya Yildirim—most of the songs below seemed to capture something important about the current year in musical form.

- “Heavy Foot” – Mon Rovía (Liberia/US)
- “Big Crime” – Neil Young (US/Canada)
- “Tempus Fugit (Plor per Palestina)” – Salvador Sobral and Sílvia Pérez Cruz (Spain/Portugal)
- “Who’ll Stand With Us?” – Dropkick Murphys (US)
- “Shmaali Tarweeda” - Yasmine Hamdan [Nicolas Jaar Remix] (Lebanon/US)
- “dijon” – daoud (France)
- “Cool Hand” – Derya Yildirim and Grup ?im?ek (Turkey/Germany)
- “Love Takes Miles” – Cameron Winter (US)
- “Pretrial (Let Her Go Home)” – Fiona Apple (US)
- “The Little Flame” – Carsie Blanton (US)
- “The Juice” - The Mary Wallopers (Ireland)

James Martin

It was a tough year to characterize any standout album that has not already been mentioned above, but this is a short list of songs that were musically interesting or engaged with social life to varying degrees of artistic success.

- “Palestine” — Christy Moore (Ireland)
- “Magnetic” — Tunde Adebimpe (US)
- “Firefly on the 4th of July” — US Girls (US)
- “I Can See The Devil” — S.G. Goodman (US)
- “The Recap” — Kneecap (Northern Ireland)
- “100 Horses” — Geese (US)
- “Voir Dire” — Die Spitz (US)
- “The Happy Dictator” — Gorillaz, Sparks (UK)
- “The Juice” — The Mary Wallopers (Ireland)
- “Descartes” — Sprints (Ireland)



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact